This section provides a range of ‘tried and tested’ creative writing exercises - the exercises were used in Write:Muse workshops and have been contributed by the writers who led those workshops.

The focus of the majority of the exercises is using museum objects, artworks and displays as inspiration for creative writing. A few exercises don’t, but they have been included to complement and support those that do.

Each exercise sheet…

• suggests a themed creative writing exercise
• consists of a description of an exercise on one side, and background notes, such as ‘Tips and hints’, on the other side
• indicates what resources you will need to do the exercise
• is photocopiable

This section also provides a brief guide to effective reading out and performing work produced from the exercises.

In addition, practical suggestions have been given on using the resources across the curriculum and in different contexts, and on providing ‘additional’ or ‘learning’ support for creative writing workshops.
The information on each sheet is divided between its front and reverse sides. On the front, there’s a description of how to do the exercise, and how to run it – this includes all the practical aspects like resources you will need, preparation and timings. On the reverse side is supplementary information about what the exercise is useful for and who might get enjoyment and inspiration from it. The format is generally consistent throughout – although there are occasional variations, and we’ve also thrown in some illustrations and quotes to add to the fun – so once you get used to it, you’ll be able to quickly find the relevant information on each page.

There are a lot of creative writing exercises and games in this guide. Do not attempt to ‘wade through them’. Rather consider this resource a ‘treasure trove’ to dip in to.

The exercises have been divided up into three groups.

**Warm ups:**
Exercises where participants only have a short space of time to look and write. These are intended to stimulate participants as a precursor to longer more in-depth exercises; they tend to focus on fun and word play to get participants engaged.

**Short writing and discussion:**
Exercises which encourage participants to create a short piece of writing which can then be discussed within the group.

**Longer exercises:**
Exercises which can lead to a more considered piece of writing or a longer discussion: either based on particular attributes or wider implications of museum objects or artworks.

Each of the exercise sheets is self-contained, so the exercises can be re-organised to reflect different curriculum priorities or schemes of work.

Exercises and games explained in this guide must not be considered to be ‘set in stone’.

The activities are designed to inspire creative writing and thinking, and they can be adapted, re-jigged, and applied in various settings. It is hoped that, through being reflexive and playful, teachers, tutors and workshop facilitators will adapt these exercises, and even invent new ones. All the writers who contributed exercises to this guide are aware of the power of adapting, and even reinventing an exercise to suite a particular group.
Timing

Some of the exercises given obviously lend themselves to being short warm-ups, whilst others are more extended. However, it is quite possible to adapt warm-ups into longer exercises, and even some of the extended exercises can be modified to fit a shorter time-frame. The loose divisions are only to help you, are only suggestions and should not be considered instructions. Remember that timing will vary considerably from group to group, and don’t forget time for participants to read out their work.

Mix and merge

There is a natural and valuable cross-over between fiction, poetry and drama. Each of these areas of writing and speaking will enhance the other. As the sheets are detachable it is possible to choose a fiction game and a poetry game that you feel complement and enhance each other, and use them together in a workshop.

Who?

We have not used icons to suggest how appropriate a given exercise is for particular user groups, although the ‘Who?’ sections on the back of the sheets do make some suggestions. We feel it is mainly better left up to individual leaders and facilitators to decide how best to present and/or adapt exercises for their participants or pupils. In fact, the ‘who’ applies as much to the person running the workshop: some people will enjoy and relate to certain exercises better than others, so it’s worthwhile finding the exercises that you are happy with, as well as finding ones that are appropriate for your participants.

Learning Objectives

Each participant will respond to these exercises in different ways, and workshop facilitators will use them in various contexts, so we’ve decided not to be prescriptive when suggesting specific curriculum areas to which these exercises may relate. What we have done where possible, however, is to identify the likely focus of the exercises; for example empathy, word-play or description, so that you can decide for yourself how best to make use of the exercises.

In fact, participants will often use a particular form of creative speech or writing technique with confidence, if they are not under the impression that it’s the focus of the activity. Perhaps the knack is to concentrate on spotting what has happened afterwards. Learning areas that have been stimulated can be identified by noticing as many of the outcomes as possible, and especially those outcomes that were not expected and might not have been anticipated. We feel this is a more creative and open-ended way of using the possibilities each exercise suggests.

Through this approach we hope you’ll be able to assess very quickly the potential of given exercises to impart skills and enhance participants’ confidence, although we accept that there are, necessarily, caveats to this depending on the context in which you’re working. This also links in with the section on the ‘workshop dynamic’, (see Section B - Running a Workshop) in which we suggest further reasons for being open-ended: you might find that section useful to read before starting.

“Two general principles: there is no right or wrong; accept that some things will work for us and some won’t.”

Peter Rumney
Many of the pages are illustrated with resources from Leicestershire’s Open Museum loans collections, and the resource’s name, and, where appropriate, catalogue number, have been included. You can order these specific resources from the Open Museum if you work in Leicester or Leicestershire; however they are just given as suggestions.

Other museum resources, objects and images will be just as appropriate. (See Section D - Museum Resources Available in the East Midlands for further information on museum loans schemes).

Remember, it’s often our everyday objects that become museum objects, so if you cannot obtain museum objects don’t panic. The exercises work just as well with objects you can find yourself. Similarly, where original artworks are used, reproductions such as postcards or posters can be just as effective. (See Section B for guidance on how to choose resources).

For more comprehensive glossaries of literary terms, try the following online resources:

www.virtualsalt.com/litterms.htm

www.bedfordstmartins.com/literature/bedlit/glossary_a.htm

www.english.cam.ac.uk/vclass/terms.htm
### Warm-up exercises

- Creative Reading
- Spoken Word-Chain
- Poetry-Percussion
- Outpour
- Sound Links
- Picture This
- Consequences
- Telling the Story
- What’s the Plot?
- Opposites
- 14 Line Poem
- Squiggles of the Future

### Short writing and discussion

- Faceted Portraits
- Being the Painter
- Stepping In or Stepping Out of Art
- Alice in Wonderland
- The Unexpected Guest
- Tactful Thank You
- Art Critic
- Blurb
- Labels
- Madame Tussaud’s Label from a Portrait
- North, South, East, West
- Where Are We Going?
- Taking Ownership
- Desert Island
- Alien Landing
- Murder!
- Shop in the Box
- Themed Writing

### Longer exercises

- Found Poem
- Write the Parcel
- Let Me Tell You My Story
- Portrait Piece
- Their Face and Yours
- What Do They See?
- Monologue
- Dialogue
- Novel
- Life’s Paper Trail
- Portraits & Objects
- Shared Picture Poem
- Plus and Minus Writing
- Small Detail
- Actual Description
- Look At This
- Describing a Painting from Memory
- Speaking Object
- List Exercise
- Mystery Object
- Someone Else’s Shoes
- Paintings as Stanzas
- Reading the Details
- Lies
- Abstract/Concrete
- Poetry Engine
- Schoenberg 12 tone poem
- Box of Tricks
- Cut!

### Key to icons

- **Paper and pens**
- **Artworks or reproductions**
- **Museum objects or everyday objects**
- **Moving Objects display**
Creative Reading

You will need: a poem

It could be a poem that you simply like, or it may be a poem that suits a particular theme or set of objects that you are working with. It is best if you use a poem that you know well.

What to do:

• Read out the poem slowly and clearly, and if you can with some feeling.

• Invite and encourage creative interpretations of the poem through discussion.

  Try to move well away from academic criticism - instead focus on the play and possibility of meanings and feelings that a reader can make from a poem.

• This exercise can also involve the participants themselves reading out the poem, or indeed a poem that they have brought along.

  This also gives the opportunity to focus on skills and confidence regarding performing and speaking.

The Man, Dhruva Mistry, Watercolour 1988

Exercise given by Mark Goodwin
This exercise focuses:

on giving participants the confidence to enjoy poetry through their own creative interpretations, and dispelling anxieties about ‘what poetry means’ by emphasising possibilities of meaning and emotion.

For a longer and more in-depth version of this exercise see ‘Reading Details’ in the Longer Exercises section.

“Words cascade like a waterfall of syllables.”

Linda Rose, Local Support Worker

Hints and tips:

Before reading out the poem to participants practise reading it out loud, become familiar with the poem.

A good first question is: ‘Do you like this poem?’. Try to get participants to focus on this question and not begin interpreting. Ask them to say why they like or don’t like a poem.

It is very valuable when participants disagree about a poem, whether it be about liking it or not, or regarding interpretation. Such instances reinforce how poems can be interpreted and engaged with in differing ways.

Who?

This is for everyone.

If you have a group that ‘takes off’ with this exercise during a workshop, do consider allowing more time for discussion than you had first intended.

It’s worth remembering that partially sighted participants or deaf lip-readers will often ‘listen’ and interpret words differently from others. This vital difference can make this exercise doubly interesting.
Spoken Word-Chain

You will need: human voices

What to do:

• This exercise is done without using pen or paper!

• Someone says a word, the next person says the first word that comes into their head - it may be associated or not. The important ‘trick’ is to respond with a word as quickly as possible without conscious thinking.

• The group can then go on to do a phrase-chain, by using phrases instead of single words. (It is best if the phrases are as ‘odd’, ‘senseless’ or ‘fantastic’ as possible.)

• Encourage the group to be playful.

Poetry-Percussion

You will need: human voices

What to do:

• This exercise or game gives the opportunity for a group to work together as kind of rhythmical band of voices.

• One person is nominated conductor. It is best if the workshop facilitator is the first conductor. A system of conductor’s hand signals will need to be agreed.

• Each group member is asked to hold a word in their mind. (Later the group can try using phrases.) When the conductor points at a person they speak their word or phrase.

• There are various ways for the conductor to create rhythms and associations. The conductor could use one person’s word and voice to punctuate other voices, or ask one person to repeat their word over and over. Whispering and chanting could also be utilised.

• At first this game will be stilted, but as the session progresses and the group relaxes some exciting and effective sequences of rhythm and voice can be produced.

“I made new acquaintances, heard their clever rhymes. and thought I still have a lot to learn! My voyage is not over, in fact it’s hardly begun.”

Wendy Battle, Adult Learning Manager

Exercises given by Mark Goodwin
Spoken Word-Chain

**This exercise focuses:**

on encouraging participants to be reflexive and free with quick verbal response.

It demonstrates how, by simply placing words side by side, we can produce poetry and ideas.

**Tips and hints:**

When you hear a good run of associations, stop the word-chain and point it out to the participants. For example the three words: ‘dog’ ‘star’ ‘mouth’ together produce a great poetic image. You could ask: ‘What is a dog-star mouth?’ and then run with the ensuing discussion and creativity.

“*For words are breath
As soft as tongues
Touching on teeth*

---

Corinne Clark,
Primary School Teacher

Poetry-Percussion

**This exercise focuses:**

on encouraging a sense of music and rhythm in the use of words.

It reveals how words and phrases can chime with each other, both in terms of sound and meaning, and how quickly poems can be generated through playing with sounds and associations.

**Hints and tips:**

At first this game can be stilted and quite daunting. However, if you persist with encouraging your group to play and have fun making mistakes - stumbling or missing their cue - they will relax.

This is an excellent warm up to do just before an ‘Outpour’ exercise, (see ‘Outpour’ exercise in this section).

Who?

This is for everybody.

It has particular value for small children, and participants who can’t or don’t like writing things down.

It could be useful and enjoyable for people who do not share first languages.

If you are working with a group who you and others are scribing for, spoken exercises will give you a break.

A microphone can be very useful - and not just as a way of recording, but also as a stimulus to perform.
Outpour

You will need: 📚, watch or clock, perhaps an 🎈 or 📜

What to do:

• This is a timed exercise.

• Ask participants to write for one, two, three, or even more minutes without the pen stopping.

  The instruction is to “write anything that comes into your head”; it may make sense or it may not.

  Try to write in sentences, even if the syntax is broken and unconventional.

  Make sure that you give a real “On your marks... Set... Go!” to make the point that speed, not thought, is of the essence.

• You can begin the exercise with a simple stimulus such as a word, or an object or artwork.

• When the time is up exclaim “Stop!” to the participants.

  Encourage them to lift their pens off the paper as soon as possible, even if it is in the middle of a word.

• Read out the results.

Glass vase and jug, D1.28

Exercise given by Mark Goodwin
This exercise focuses:

on generating the material (i.e. ‘words’) that poets and writers must have before they can shape it into a chosen form. It is an especially good precursor to a session which is focused on poetry.

It encourages participants to become freer with their creative language and access the deeper realms of their imaginations.

It also encourages participants to be more confident at reading and speaking out.

“How do I know what I’m thinking until I’ve written it?”

E.M. Forster

Tips and hints:

Spend a good deal of time encouraging reading out and discussing the possibilities of participants’ work.

It is also a good opportunity to explore reading out work clearly and with expression.

However, do make it very clear that no-one has to read out. Sometimes free-writing can generate very personal unexpected content.

And celebrate the variety of work produced – reassure participants that there is no right or wrong way of producing.

The beauty of this exercise is that it demonstrates just how differently each of us can write, even though we may all be writing about the same thing or from the same starting place.

Point out that the material, or word-hoard, just discovered can be used in different ways: it may be that the whole of the outpour is the bones of a poem and needs just a little editing; one phrase in the outpour could start or belong to a poem (or indeed a story); perhaps the unexpected content of the outpour reveals to a writer hidden concerns.

“I may talk of frivolous things that sound of little weight. But they have been wrenched from a place seen seldom by anyone, but most of all seen least by me.”

Jane Tugwell, Museum Assistant

Who?

For everyone who is reasonably comfortable with writing, from children to adults.
Sound Links (using a painting or object)

You will need: 🎨 📦 📚

What to do:

- Make a short list of words gleaned from a painting or object.

  For example, a Singer sewing machine could give you the words:
  **treadle, needle, singer, thread, gilt.**

- For each word make a list of words that have a sound connection - through rhyme, half-rhyme, alliteration, assonance, onomatopoeia, pun

  For example, singer could give you the following:
  **ringer, finger, bring, sin, bling ...**

  Gilt could give you:
  **guilt, guild, lilt, guile, file, Nile ...**

  As you can see in the second example the connections can become looser and looser, if you wish.

- Use your lists of words, or some of the words, to write a poem about or inspired by the painting or object. There are various ways of doing this.

  The form of the poem could be stipulated, for example write a ‘14 line poem’ that has the sound-linked words at the end of each line.

  Or you could use the entire list and link each word in turn through sentences. For example:
  **The ringing finger brings sin’s bling.**

Exercise given by Helen Johnson
This exercise focuses:

on the sound that poetry makes, and how poetry is made out of sounds.

The exercise demonstrates how sound patterns, such as rhyme or assonance, actually inspire a writer to produce creative sentences and images.

“Poetry is the sound of sense.”
Robert Frost

Hints and tips:

Encourage writers to play with the sounds and **not to worry** about making conventional associations or sense.

If the work produced has little to do with the painting or object, again don’t worry. The painting or object is there only to encourage the production of writing.

The writing produced may be extremely bizarre or surreal, however it may also be straightforward and easily accessible.

After the exercise you could discuss differences between pieces of writing produced.

This exercise need not involve a work of art or object, it could simply begin by choosing a word, either at random or from a theme.

“Of what we speak and how we say, Our inner self comes out to play.”
Jane Tugwell, Museum Assistant

Who?

This is a great exercise for people with a sensory impairment, and also for those not confident with writing.

This exercise works well for adults as well as small children.

For small children it is great fun and enough to simply speak out or chant their lists of sound-linked words. It’s fun for adults too!
Picture This

You will need: , 4 (either hanging on a wall, in a picture book, or as postcards/reproductions).

What to do:

• Look at each of the 4 pictures in turn. Do not reveal the titles of the pictures.

• Write down words or phrases that spring to mind.

  These words or phrases could be formed from anything:

  - colours
  - images
  - memories
  - how the picture makes you feel
  - what it reminds you of
  - questions

• Discuss the writing exploring each picture in turn (the titles of the pictures can be revealed afterwards).

Exercise given by Katie Daniels
This exercise focuses:

on ways of responding to and reading paintings, through using words.

“All has its own beauty – the light, the ethereal, the dark and heavy.”

Linda Rose, Locality Support Worker

Hints and tips:

Encourage participants to spend time really looking and feeling in response to the paintings.

Emphasise that all responses are valid, be they simple statements and descriptions or totally unexpected and odd phrases. Try to dispel trepidation about misinterpretations - stress that this game is about creativity not critical acumen.

This warm-up is a particularly good starting place for experiencing how to use paintings and artworks to generate creative writing.

At first it might appear that a visually impaired participant may not be able to do this exercise. However, if the exercise included the facilitator or even other participants describing the painting, then this exercise could move the focus away from vision and allow comparison with another prioritised sense or senses.

“I do not seek. I find.”

Pablo Picasso

Who?

For everyone.

Small children may need leading into some of the more subtle details. Also, perhaps use fewer paintings, or just concentrate on one.
Consequences

You will need: 📝

What to do:

• Take a piece of paper. Write any word that comes into your head onto the first line of the page.

• Fold over the paper at the very top so as to cover the first line and its word, as in the game Consequences.

• Pass the paper onto the person to your right, and receive from the left.

• Open it and read the word that has just been written by the person on the left.

• Write the first word that comes into your head, immediately onto the second line.

• Fold the paper again, pass it on, receive the next, open, read the word that has just been written, write the first word that comes into your head immediately, and so on ...

• Depending on the size of the group, when the paper reaches its owner after one, two or even three cycles, read out the list to the group.

Telling the Story (to follow ‘Consequences’)

You could define a story as a series of chronological events, e.g.: ‘The King died, The Queen died, The Princess succeeded to the throne.’

• Take your list from the ‘Consequences’ exercise, use each word in a sentence in the order in which they are written to tell a story.

• Read the story out. You could then go on to decide if the order works as it is, or if it would work better rearranged.

What’s the Plot?

Plot could be defined as a series of events deliberately arranged to reveal their dramatic, thematic, and emotional significance, e.g.: ‘The King died in his prime, The Queen died of grief, etc.

• Take the same list of words as used in ‘Telling the Story’, or if you prefer swap with someone else’s list.

• You may choose to not use all the sentences, you might just take just one or two. You can change the order, or fuse elements. Don’t just tell the chronological events, give your view and understanding of the story. Read the story out.
These 3 exercises focus:

on word association and the connections that produce narrative and plot. They are especially good warm-up exercises for a session which focuses on fiction writing.

Playing with words in this way reveals that it is the process of ‘playing with words’ that actually produces stories.

“*My eyes have seen stories.*”

Yvette-Serena de Sylva, Community Artist

Tips and hints:

Encourage your group to be as playful as possible, to allow them to surprise themselves and each other.

Don’t worry if narratives and plots produced are very strange. Sometimes a storyline may be produced that doesn’t make sense, or doesn’t seem to work like a conventional narrative.

A bizarre or surreal story, one that doesn’t seem to have a proper beginning middle or end, can be valuable in that it may disturb us, or it may provide a stimulus for discussion on what makes different kinds of fiction work.

“*Slightest accidents open up new worlds.*”

Jeanette Winterson

Who?

Suitable for everyone.

With very young children the focus could be on speaking out rather than writing down.

Victorian Butcher’s Shop, H93
Opposites

You will need:

What to do:

• Begin by doing the ‘Consequences’ exercise in this section, but when you respond with the first word that comes into your head try to ensure your word has absolutely no connection to the word you are responding to.

  This is a very difficult thing to do. However, this exercise can be most productive in that even if you ‘fail’ to respond with a word that has nothing to do with the previous word, the ‘struggle’ will have given you a word that you would not have otherwise thought of.

• Read out the lists, and challenge each other to make connections between the opposite words!

• As in ‘Telling the Story’ and ‘What’s the Plot?’, write brief stories or plots with your ‘Opposites’ list of words.

Hand Owl, Gerda Rubenstein

Exercise given by Peter Rumney
This exercise focuses:

on sharing with the previous three warm-ups for fiction, the production of narrative and plot through playing with word association.

However, this ‘opposites’ exercise adds a twist that will encourage imaginations to work and play harder.

“If you want to give your unconscious a chance you must keep your eye on something else.”

Louis MacNeice

Tips and hints:

Encourage the group to stick at it. At first this exercise can seem very hard, but if a group persists with playing then the surprises can be most productive and rewarding.

Make the most of what participants produce – point out how wonderful certain bizarre and extraordinary connections are. Try to engender excitement about unusual content so as to dispel trepidation.

Who?

It is worth trying this exercise with younger children, to see how they respond. But it is probably better to aim this at older participants.

It is also best aimed at groups with a higher level of literacy.
Squiggles of the Future

You will need: blank paper, coloured crayons (but pencils will do).

What to do:

• Each participant takes a crayon or pencil – if possible a coloured one.
• Ask each participant to rest the tip of their pencil on the centre of the page.
• Now ask them to think of the first emotion they had this morning – were they tired, enthusiastic, hungry for breakfast, or bored at the idea of coming to a workshop….?
• Now everyone closes their eyes and, with that emotion still in mind, it’s squiggle-time. Everyone draws randomly, for about 20 seconds.
• When squiggle-time is over, everyone passes their paper to the person on their left.
• Ask participants to write or speak what they thought the emotion was, and point to specific shapes to explain what led them to this conclusion.

Alternative:

This warm-up exercise can be expanded if the writing is particularly good:

• A longer version is to use this squiggle to make predictions about what is going to happen to the artist during that day/week/year. Examine the shapes, and predict how they will affect the artist’s life: “You will fall in a purple hole”; “a rabbit with antennae will eat you”…

Drawing from a Write:Muse workshop

Exercise given by Kerry Featherstone
This exercise focuses:

on giving free-rein to the imagination, and allowing participants to write – and draw – without any preconceived outcomes weighing them down.

Giving the opportunity to allow the mind to receive suggestions, and for everyone to work to their own ability.

Hints and tips:

Make sure that participants really have their eyes closed. One method is to get them to do the squiggling blindfolded, and then ask the whole group to comment.

Also make sure that participants don’t actually attempt to draw – or write – anything during squiggle-time. The point is randomness. This frees the participants from feeling under pressure to produce a figurative drawing of something.

For participants with less confidence, offer the beginning of a line: “Today you will…” and ask them to complete it a certain number of times by using the images in the squiggle. Another way of making the writing more unified is to mention the colour of the squiggle in every line: “You will fall in a purple hole, a purple rabbit will eat you, there will be a purple face in the clouds…”

For more confident writers, ask for more examples, and move towards structuring the list into a form: sonnet, for example, or a prose narrative.

The interpretation can be psychologically revealing: obviously it will be based on the writer’s thoughts, not the artist’s, and this can reveal obsessions with certain emotions or subjects. These need to be handled sensitively if they do arise – they may well have nothing to do with the thoughts, emotions or life, of the person who drew the squiggle.

Who?

Anyone can do this, and it’s a good warm-up for adults, but kids will love the crayons, and reliance on the colour will help them feel safer about writing things down.
14 Line Poem

You will need: 🎨, a range of 📦

What to do:

- Get the participants to choose an object.
- Read out the following questions and get the participants to answer them from the point of view of the chosen object, (as ‘I’).

  What are you?  (e.g. ‘I am a cracked bottle...’)

  How are you feeling now?

  Where would you rather be?

  What relationships do you have?
  (i.e. describe family, friends, how you get on with other bottles)

  What do you dream of doing?

  What worries you?

  What would you like others to think of you?

  What keeps you awake at nights? (thoughts or external things)

  What is the best thing you ever did?

  What is the worst thing you ever did?  (e.g. ‘I once ...’)

  What makes you feel guilty?

  What is your favourite time of day/night?

  What is the point of your life?

  How would you like to be remembered?

- Give participants a few minutes to look at their own work, or, depending on the nature of the workshop, at others’.

- Read out the work (especially different poems on the same object) and discuss.
This exercise focuses:

participants’ attention away from themselves or the act of writing, and onto the object. By answering 14 tutor-given questions, the participants will end up with a piece of writing bringing the object to life.

This is a good first exercise as the form and content are provided, and unconfident/new-to-poetry participants will be able to write without ‘being themselves’ or having to think about anything but being the object.

Hints & tips:

It is important that participants choose their own object: either by walking about and collecting one from outside or inside (e.g. leaves, stones, board markers, scissors, tin cans…) or from a range of objects provided (e.g. something the tutor brings, museum objects etc).

Read the questions out one by one, letting everyone complete the answer before moving on to the next question. You could also make up questions of your own.

It is up to you when/if you ‘reveal’ that the exercise is one in which participants will actually have written about themselves. Obviously, be sensitive to people who do not wish to read out their work, especially after being told this.

A further exercise could be to turn the work produced into a sonnet.

Who?

Any students capable of sustained ‘empathy’ with an object.

A simplified version can work with younger children, but the more complicated answers, and resulting discussion, are better for older children and adults.
Faceted Portraits

You will need: 🎨 📝 (with a person in it)

What to do:

- Look at a portrait and imagine 3 different aspects to the person’s character.
- Write a monologue or a poem using all 3 aspects of that 1 character.

For example, The Mona Lisa is a mild well-to-do lady, however she is also cruel to animals, and she can very skilfully illuminate religious texts (her possessing this skill suggests all sorts of character traits).
Bhima the tyrant on the other hand, may be cruel to his subjects but loves his war horses.

Being the Painter

You will need: 🎨 📝

What to do:

- Look at a painting, imagine you are the artist that painted the picture.

  You could write about how you felt about the painting. Did you like the person or scene you were painting?

  You could write about the materials and techniques you used, or your love of the smell of oils.

  You could write about your daily life intruding on your painting; for example, the phone could keep ringing, or just at the moment you’ve decided to capture the evening light a thunder storm begins.

Exercises given by Catherine Byron and Mark Goodwin
These exercises focus:

on imagining yourself into another character or persona.

They also provide a novel way of appreciating and critiquing a painting. Through these exercises it is possible to come to realisations and perspectives about an artwork that could not have been reached otherwise.

Hints and tips:

For the first exercise it can be effective to begin by writing a list of phrases that the character might use, and the way they might speak, including verbal tics and pauses. It is also useful to focus on the character’s emotional responses to the juxtapositions and tensions within their personality.

For the second exercise encourage participants to imagine the kind of passion or obsession an artist might possess. It is most effective to focus on the physical act of painting - what it feels like physically as well as emotionally.

Both these exercises lend themselves to the production of some kind of performance reading.

Verbal tick: Characters can be brought to life through putting verbal ticks into their speech. A verbal tick is a habitually repeated phrase, word, utterance, or even the omission of certain words. Charles Dickens’ characters more often than not have distinctive verbal ticks.

Who?

These exercises can be adapted for almost any group.

In adult education groups there are often those who paint: their experiences could be easily entwined with the second exercise.
Stepping In or Stepping Out of Art

You will need: [a painting with a figure]

What to do:

- Imagine stepping into the painting, and becoming an extra character within it.
- Or imagine a figure from the painting stepping out. You could also stipulate that the figure does something particular, for example the character will tell you something.
- Look at the painting and then imagine what is round the corner, or what is outside the frame.
- Construct a poem by giving a phrase to start each line, for example “I can see…” “I have come to tell you…” “I am far from home…”
- Use your arrival in the painting as the start of a story relating your adventures, or your arrival in the real world as the start of a quest to find someone or something. This can be similar to the popular form of writing about a dream, but made much more guided and structured by the presence of concrete images from the painting.

Alice in Wonderland Variation

- Imagine a tiny escalator going from the floor up to the picture, then imagine yourself shrinking and going up the escalator into the picture.
  Once inside ask: What can you smell? What can you hear? What textures are around you? What can you feel; what sensations do you have? Are you cold or hot? Can you taste anything? Really look around you - what can you see? Are there tiny details in the picture that you couldn’t see from the outside?
- This can either be written in prose, as an adventure story, or as a poem that focuses on seeing things from a new perspective. Ask participants to stand really close to an object or painting, until the details take on new shapes and appearance, and use that as the start of the ‘experience’.

The Unexpected Guest Variation

You will need: two paintings, at least one of which has someone in it.

- Imagine that a person from one painting steps into the other painting. For example, what would it be like to be the Mona Lisa stepping into a painting of a World War I battle scene?
- This can be written as a dialogue, with two contrasting voices, and works well as a collaboration piece. It can also be an experiment in voice, as a character who appears totally out of place describes a scene in an incongruous way (imagine a cowboy describing a Queen’s coronation, or a cavalry officer describing a sporting event).

Exercises given by Katie Daniels, Helen Johnson and Deborah Tyler-Bennett
These exercises focus:

on using imagination to produce creative, atmospheric and dramatic interpretations of an artwork.

The ‘Alice in Wonderland’ variation focuses creative interpretation through the senses. (This exercise also challenges ideas about perspective, and a person’s place and size in the world.)

The ‘Unexpected Guest’ variation focuses on generating a whole new creative work by juxtaposing or combining two artworks.

In addition, these exercises can draw attention to the norms which we expect from certain voices, and the styles and vocabulary which we expect from them. Putting them in incongruous settings puts those styles into relief, and allows participants to play with ways of making them stand out.

Paul Durcan’s The Earl of Bellamont is an amusing example - where the splendid Earl from the 18th Century, dressed in flowing flamingo-pink robes and ostrich feather hat steps out from his frame in the National Gallery of Ireland to join the cafeteria’s queue. (This poem comes from Crazy About Women. See Section D – Literature Development in the East Midlands.)

For example, William Hogarth’s Self Portrait with Pug is painted in bronze tones – this suggests a certain warmth and softness which in turn invokes the actual feel of the painter’s velvet robes and the pug dog’s fur.

Don’t always pick the main figure in a painting: the peripheral characters are the ones about whom you will have fewer preconceptions, and this may help the imagination.

Hints and tips:

If a painting doesn’t at first seem to make much reference to physical senses, such as touch or smell, it can be helpful to focus on the painting’s colours and textures to suggest sense experiences.

“And I follow, follow to cold lands of adventure beyond.”

SueKelly, Teacher

Who?

These exercises are for everyone.

They could be used as starting points for discursive group work with people who are not confident about writing. They could also be used as stimuli or warm-ups for issue-based group work.

The first exercise could precede discursive group work around History, Geography, or cross-curricular activities.

After a Long Silence, Deborah Thomas
Tactful Thank You

You will need: , perhaps an "

What to do:

• Write a tactful thank you for an unwanted gift which is a work of art.

  For example, regarding *The Mona Lisa*:
  ‘We were so pleased with your gift, especially because brown and all its shades are just what we like in a painting. We were also delighted by the lady’s rather unusual gaze. We had also just planned to up our house insurance premium and this has truly given us a kick up the backside.’

Alternative: Art Critic

• Compose a letter to the creator of an artwork, this may be complimentary or it may not.

• You could also write in character, and have the person depicted in a portrait compose a letter to the portrait’s artist. Again this may be complimentary or not.

Blurb

For this exercise you will need: that include people, squares of paper with emotions and situations written on them, and a bag, box or envelope to put them in.

What to do:

• Choose a painting, then dip into the bag, box or envelope of emotions and situations.

• Write a blurb about the painting based on the emotion or situation chosen.

  For example write a blurb for *The Mona Lisa* about betrayal, or about hilarity.

Exercises given by Mark Goodwin, Helen Johnson, Bead Roberts, Deborah Tyler-Bennett
These exercises focus:

on imitating and playing with different formal ways of writing about art.

Rather than being about imagining yourself into the painting or artwork, these exercises are about imagining yourself (or a character) looking at a painting or artwork.

These exercises can also reveal the creative value of writing about a work of art that we don’t like.

Hints and tips:

These exercises give a good opportunity to play with humour and comedy (although it is possible to produce serious creative work also).

The ‘Art Critic’ links particularly well with the ‘Being the Painter’ exercise (in this section).

It is effective to focus on the kind of mental attitude a critic might have towards a work that they like, or perhaps don’t like. (It is possible to compare this attitude to the artist’s passion mentioned in ‘Being the Painter’).

For ‘Blurb’ you could write in the style of a movie trailer or book blurb.

Who?

This is more for older children and adults, although it is possible to adapt for younger children.

If you link the ‘Art Critic’ exercise with the ‘Being the Painter’ exercise you could have half a group being the artists and the other half being the critics. This could arouse some very interesting creative debate.

Muggin Mugs by Ray Davis and Daniel Moore, D5.38
Labels

You will need: and luggage labels

What to do:

• Examine an object closely, then write a label for it.

  This could be a historically based ‘museum-curator-friendly’ label, or it could lie! You could make this as ‘eccentric’ as you like. If you start off with a historical fact, you could develop it into an oddly detailed fiction.

  You could also write the label pretending to be a character. For example, you are an anthropologist, artist, or a social scientist.

  You could also write the label using rhyme.

• The finished writing can be copied onto luggage or museum labels and displayed.

Madame Tussaud’s Label from a Portrait

For this exercise you will need: and luggage labels

What to do:

• Make up an interesting fact about the person in the portrait.

• Imagine the person as a waxwork, then write a label for them using their interesting fact.

• This must be a rhyming couplet and must be humorous.

“There are lots of ways of using objects for writing. Objects sort of have a life of their own. You can handle them, look at them from a distance, read up on what you know of their real past, or invent a past for them.”

Deborah Tyler-Bennett

Exercises given by Katie Daniels, Peter Rumney, Deborah Tyler-Bennett
These exercises focus:

on working out the details that are important depending on how you ‘see’ an object.

Writing concisely – the labels should be brief, but can suggest much more than they state a skill which can be carried over into writing poetry and prose fiction.

(Many creative writing museum workshops and many exercises use the idea of labels. Further ‘labelling’ exercises can also be found on the V&A website. See Section D – Museum Resources Available in the East Midlands.)

Hints and tips:

Try to make sure that participants don’t get ‘blocked’ by their lack of knowledge about an object: this absence of facts is a space that can be filled by the imagination.

This may be problematic for some learners (particularly those with autism and related conditions), who may be unsettled by the lack of solid ground, and the idea of writing when they’re not sure about the subject.

For these learners, try to start by focussing on what can be known (description, materials, etc) and then work towards induction through logic (use, age of object) to the more creative aspects, rather than expecting them to make a ‘leap’ straight from object to imagined world.

Who?

These exercises work with adults and young people alike. They are useful exercises to engage creatively with history curricula.

“Labelled by an Anthropologist:

Dashing black strength, worn with pride.
Polished leather, so smooth you can reflect the sun on a pollen-filled meadow.
Integral to the purpose and display of ancient rituals and life-long history.
Purpose, place, pride. Strength, determination, military-precision and stride.”

Kate Hall, Marketing Officer
North, South, East, West

You will need: a person in it

What to do:

• Write, in the first person, from the point of view of a figure in the artwork.

• Produce 4 stanzas of poetry, or 4 short paragraphs of prose, describing what the character sees if they turn through 360°.

• Start each section with the phrase “To my north…”, “To my west…”, etc.

• This can be straightforward description of what is in the artwork, an imagined landscape beyond the scope of the picture, or a more metaphorical view: for example,

  imagine that north is the future, south is the past, east is fear, west is ambition. This metaphorical version can be altered according to your desired outcomes: empathy, historical understanding, geography…

Where Are We Going?

You will need: featuring either a means of transport or a road/river etc.

What to do:

• Ask the participants to place themselves on the road, or in the means of transport.

• Ask the question “Where are we going?” and allow them to answer in either prose of poetry.

• The setting of the artwork can provide a structured opening, through more or less direct description, but encourage the participants to imagine what is beyond the frame, and write about it.

Exercises given by Kerry Featherstone
**North, South, East, West**

**This exercise focuses:**

on relating the concrete and the metaphorical or, put another way, exterior and interior worlds. This is an important function of social development, but is rarely tested by being put into words.

**Hints and Tips:**

Don’t do too much interpretation of the image beforehand: it will tend to ‘fix’ the meaning/setting in the participants’ minds. Concentrate on the figure, and the aspects that you want to bring out of it.

**Who?**

This exercise is appropriate for more advanced participants, especially taking the metaphorical aspect into account. However, the complexity can be reduced if dealing with a historical context, by limiting the content to what you know that participants are aware of.

The whole exercise can be simplified again by simply including what is in the picture, and using N/S/E/W as an organising structure for straightforward description.

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**Where Are We Going?**

**This exercise focuses:**

on producing imaginative narrative with a supporting resource for the opening.

The narrative will be in the first person, so it also encourages writers to place themselves in the position of a character in a painting, and so detaches them from the ‘I’ of a usual first-person narrative.

**Hints and tips:**

If you’re focussing on one means of transport, you could pre-teach some vocabulary, either on prepared lists, or through brainstorming with the whole group. This is perhaps most useful for lower-level participants.

If you’re looking for historical, geographical or reminiscence work, then this can be used as the spur for writing about a specific place/time (e.g. Napoleon’s retreat from Moscow).

If you want to encourage younger participants to use their imaginations, you could suggest that they think of a magical setting, for example an enchanted forest or land of dragons, and use that as the destination beyond the frame.

The best results are obtained by setting some of these parameters beforehand, so that writers have a textual ‘destination’ to aim for. This provides a frame for what might otherwise be unfocused because of its open-ended nature.

**Who?**

More or less anyone can engage with this exercise: it can be a very short exercise, a piece of imaginative art criticism, or a long prose narrative.
Taking Ownership

You will need: 📝 📦
(perhaps one for each participant)

What to do:

• Present the participants with an object – one each, or one for the whole group.

• Ask them to write a piece of prose demonstrating that the object is theirs, and what they use it for.

• Encourage the use of detail and imagination to support their claims:
  
  “the scratch on the left was from when Auntie Jen knocked it off the shelf”;
  “it’s the only way I can clean the fluff from behind the washer”…

Desert Island

You will need: 📖 , some 📦

What to do:

• Ask participants to imagine they have been marooned on a desert island. Apart from palm trees and sand, the only other item, washed up on the shore, is… the museum object!

• Write a description of what the object could be used for, and why it would be useful.

  This can be done in the form of a fictional narrative, and can be in the style of a survival guide, newspaper report or history book.

• Depending on time, the focus can include description of circumstances and setting, or can simply be an account of the object and its use.

• To further develop the narrative, perhaps imagine the object has magical powers…

Exercises given by Kerry Featherstone
Taking Ownership

This exercise focuses:

- on relating an object to the individual and their real or imagined lifestyle.
- On making fiction that is believable – with the right amount of fact to support the story, and making best use of the object to support the story.
- It is a good starting point for discussion about how people see the same object in different ways, or as having different value.
- This exercise is also fun for producing pieces that can be ‘performed’ rather than read – adopt a voice and a persona, and the content should really be convincing!

Hints and Tips:

- Museum objects such as tools, decorations or souvenirs are very effective with this exercise.
- The aim is not to produce something believable in content, but convincing in tone. If imagination says that an object is a vital part of a project to send the cat to the moon, that’s fine – but the writing must convince the reader that the writer really does own the object, and has owned it for a while…
- It could be used as a warm-up exercise, or a ‘way in’ to more complex writing exercises using the same object or objects.

Who?

Older children and adults will enjoy the first exercise.
Anyone will enjoy the second exercise – younger children may need some discussion beforehand about the nature of the desert island, and the lifestyle that it implies!

Desert Island

This exercise focuses:

- on the object and its use - this diverts pressure away from the sense of having to produce a piece of writing.
- Once participants have a few interesting or fun ideas, the writing will come quite naturally as an expression of them.

Hints and Tips:

- It’s important to start this exercise without much detail/factual background on the objects.
- The exercise is a test of inventiveness, and can appeal to the more hands-on, rather than linguistically gifted, participants.
- Older museum objects are good for this because they will often be unfamiliar, especially to younger participants.
- Participants however, can be encouraged to invent new roles for familiar objects.

Older children and adults will enjoy the first exercise.
Anyone will enjoy the second exercise – younger children may need some discussion beforehand about the nature of the desert island, and the lifestyle that it implies!
**Alien Landing**

You will need: or group of objects

What to do:

- Show the objects to the participants. Don’t dwell on their past, current or potential use.

- In a 10 minute discussion, concentrate on tactile descriptions, materials, size, shape and weight.

- Ask the participants to imagine that aliens have attacked earth. By random teleporting, they arrive in a room which contains these objects.

  Using the laser lights growing in their foreheads, they illuminate the objects, which they have never seen before… what do they make of these things?

- This can either be written as narrative, or poetry, and in the first or third person.

- Try to encourage as much inventiveness as possible in the responses:

  if the aliens come from a planet with no atmosphere, then a bike pump won’t make much sense to them… is it a weapon? Is the hairbrush a musical instrument that vibrates in the air, causing ultra-sonic tunes?

**Murder!**

You will need: or group of objects

What to do:

- Write a murder story, in which the chosen object is the murder weapon.

- Participants can either decide on characters, setting and motivation, or you can supply these details.

Variations:

- Ask the participants to describe how they might use the same object to: save someone’s life, break out of prison, hunt caribou, hold up a train…

- The writing might be a poem celebrating the greatness of the object by looking at all of these uses in a stanza each, or a prose fiction featuring the object as the star of the story.

Exercises given by Kerry Featherstone
**Alien Landing focuses:**

on helping participants see things from a new perspective. The process of ‘defamiliarisation’ will help to produce writing which is fresh and unpredictable.

It also focuses on using the humour of the absurd to help the participants relax, and on challenging assumptions about the relationships between things, their use and their appearance.

**Murder! focuses:**

on seeing the object beyond its usual role. Incorporating incongruous objects, or objects in incongruous roles, can make a piece of writing really sparkle, and provide interest for the reader.

On being inventive with ideas, and transferring that inventiveness into writing.

**Hints and tips:**

For the first exercise allow as much handling of the objects as is necessary. Try switching off the lights, then switching them back on again to mimic the moment of discovery.

After the writing has been finished, discuss how the mind discovers, describes and conjectures – in what order? Logically or emotionally? What shapes/textures/colours are viewed positively which are seen as a threat?

With the second exercise the more satisfying versions come from the most inventive ideas.

Almost any object can be use to bash a victim over the head, but using it to swing a bucket of bricks from a chandelier is so much more fun….

**Who?**

Alien Landing can be suitable for older children, and even adults!

It can also work particularly well with students of art/photography.

Murder! is particularly good for younger children, who won’t over-intellectualise the possibilities, or be too bound by reality.
Shop in the Box

You will need: 

What to do:

• Imagine that the box is a shop window display, and that all the things included in it are the contents of a peculiar shop. You could write some notes on what sort of display it is (are the things for sale, or are they displayed to cause some sort of public reaction and tempt you into the shop?).

• Write a poem of 12 to 16 lines on the display and its effect on onlookers. You should include some of the following:
  - the glassy nature of the box (imagine it as window glass)
  - the colours and contours of the objects
  - why you think these are displayed in the way they are
  - onlookers’ reactions
  - the names of items
  - the shop’s owner

• The writing can either be done singly, or in groups.

Themed Writing

You will need: 

What to do:

• Consider the theme of the box in front of you, and then write down as many ideas as you can – focus on how the objects relate to each other, and include descriptions. These notes should take 5 - 10 minutes.

• Using the notes write a 20 line poem, where each line describes a different aspect of the box.

  This is a kind of ‘kaleidoscope’ poem that expresses a series of impressions to do with the display box’s theme. Each time a line changes, the subject flashes to something else.

• You could look at the theme in terms of colour, stories told, images suggested, purpose, and effect.

• You could perhaps try to make this poem appear box-shaped on the page. One way to do this is to use lines that are visually equal in length.

Exercises given by Deborah Tyler-Bennett
Shop in a Box focuses:

on how powerfully the imagination can produce a detailed vision, whilst using the appearance of the display box and a suggested scenario as a trigger.

Themed Writing focuses:

on showing how the technique of simply listing, and thus making sudden shifts of focus in rapid succession, can produce powerfully evocative writing.

(Listing is a traditional literary technique - many poems make use of it; many poems are comprised entirely of lists. Consider, for example, *For I will Consider my Cat Geoffrey* by Christopher Smart.)

Hints and tips:

For the first exercise, encourage participants to make notes that are as detailed as possible. Word-lists are very helpful, as are lists of phrases to do with setting and ownership (and the shop-keeper’s perspective on this).

The second exercise would work very well in conjunction with drawing – the combined results would make a splendid display.

Who?

Everyone should enjoy these, and they are suitable for most ages.

For primary children - twinning the second exercise with an art workshop, spread over a few sessions, would work very well.
**Found Poem**

You will need: ✍️, various texts, labels or documents

(A found poem consists of text not written by the poet but rather ‘found’ and then manipulated into a poem. You can identify text yourself, and photocopy pages as preparation. Alternatively, if you are holding your workshop in a library, allow participants to select a couple of books themselves, preferably on subjects about which they know nothing. Opening them at random, work from whatever they see in front of them.)

What to do:

- Underline (or copy out, if you are using a library book!) phrases, sentences or images that are particularly striking or interesting, in terms of meaning or sound.
- Order them, in any way you like. You might choose to produce a nonsense poem in which the sounds are interesting, or work at putting together lines that have some linked meaning.
- For the purest ‘found poem’ the poet simply decides where the poem’s lines will end, but it is also possible to edit and rearrange the text. This can be a lot of fun, so it can often work well to allow participants as much editorial intervention as they wish; this means that less confident writers don’t have to do anything to the text, but more confident ones can if they wish.
- For more advanced writers, this might simply be the first step on the way to a much more crafted poem, which could eventually only bear a few traces of the individual text.

**Write the Parcel**

You will need: 📦 (a small object that has been wrapped repeatedly in plain brown paper)

What to do:

The number of wrappings must be equal to the number of participants. (It is a good idea to wrap with string rather than sticky tape.)

- The first person unwraps a layer and then writes onto that wrapping what they imagine the wrapped object is. The second person does the same, and the third and so on.
- The writing on the wrappings may be just single words, or it could be phrases of no more than fourteen words. (What is written may also allude to the process of unwrapping, or the game of Pass the Parcel.)
- When the object is finally unwrapped, the writing on the wrappers, and the object itself can then be discussed. Are there any interesting juxtapositions? Can the writing and the revealed object be put in to some kind of context?
- A collaborative poem could be produced from everyone’s writing.

Exercises given by Deborah Tyler-Bennett and Mark Goodwin
These exercises focus:

on the ease with which creative writing can be produced from words and phrases that are already in a text of some kind. Building confidence by placing the onus on these texts, and not on creating new material. Allowing participants to play with sound and meaning without working to a predetermined theme.

Hints and tips:

Many resources from Leicestershire’s Open Museum, come with interpretation material or original instructions or manuals. These texts, as objects themselves, are a treasure-trove of poems waiting to be found. For example, the instructions for using an old-fashioned typewriter may contain a section of prose that sounds more like a poem. Any kind of text can be utilised, be it a contemporary label on a painting or a 1930s poster advertising tobacco.

When it comes to reading out the found poems, a great deal of illuminating discussion can be generated about why each writer chose to alter and lay out the text in the way that they did.

Who?

Most ages and levels of writer will enjoy this: for more advanced writers it can be the start of a more challenging workshop, whilst for beginners it can be a workshop in itself. Also good for participants who do not have English as a first language.

The following poem was found by Sally Chisholm in the County Reserve collection of books at Leicestershire Libraries Services Headquarters, during a Behind The Scenes poetry workshop. This text was lifted directly from a book about card games, and then made into a poem by only altering the layout - the result is a baffling but most amusing set of instructions.

### Skat: Germany’s National Card Game

The value of the hand game is thus found by adding the number of factors applicable above to the number of matadors held or not held and multiplying the basic value of the game by the resultant total.

There is, however, a special game value for an open grand.

If a grand game is to be played open its base value is taken as 36 (not 24) and is multiplied by

a.) The number of matadors plus
b.) six

for the necessary Schwartz declared.

Thus the highest possible hand game value is with (or without) four plus six ten, times 36-360.

Bidding begins after players have sorted their cards.

by Sally Chisholm
Let Me Tell You my Story

You will need: with a person in it

What to do:

- Imagine you are the character portrayed in a portrait.
- You could tell your life story, you could tell of the worst thing you ever did, or you could talk about the moment the picture was painted.

It is also possible to start with a strange opening line, for example for the Mona Lisa the line could be: ‘I’m actually a man!’ or ‘Turn that damn phone off!’ Or you could start with the phrase: ‘Haven’t I seen you somewhere before?’

Portrait Piece

What to do:

- Decide the following, and write it down.
  - Who is in the portrait?
  - What are they called?
  - Is their name real or fake?
  - If they don’t have a name or you can’t find a name for them, why not?
  - If they have a name, does it suit them?
  - Physical description – age, weight, height, attire etc.
  - Have they a job? Do they enjoy it?
  - Give them some peculiar habit(s).
  - Where do they live? How long have they been there?
  - Give them friends or family, or not!
  - Give them a pet.
  - How do they feel about Christmas?
  - Do they read their horoscope, and do they believe it?
  - Can they dance?
  - What sort of music do they like? (Perhaps give them a top 10.)
  - Do they have any hobbies?
  - If their house was on fire and they could rescue one thing, what would it be?
  - Tell us something unusual about them.
  - Do they have a secret? Do you know what it is?

- Write a moment for the character you have created. Put them in a specific place at a specific time. A small incident happens, what is it? What does it tell the reader about the character? How does this brief glimpse end? Maybe tell the whole story within the space of just one page.

Exercises given by Helen Johnson, Deborah Tyler-Bennett and Bead Roberts
The first exercise focuses:
on creating a believable intimate voice.

The second exercise focuses:
on using a work of art to ‘build’ a character from scratch, paying particular attention to a character’s emotional framework and personal history.

“How clouded are your memories? Did you reconvene just to confer? To get your stories straight? Your alibis?”

Cathy Pownall, SFL Co-ordinator

Hints and tips:
The first exercise links closely with the ‘Monologue’ and ‘Dialogue’ exercises in this section.

In the second exercise, the choice of naming or not naming the character is crucial. A nameless character can have depth but will always have an unknowable or even aloof quality. A nickname will suggest a familiarity that a formal title will not.

Both these games are great for generating characters for poetry as well as for fiction.

Who?

These exercises are for everyone.

For younger children, perhaps use fewer questions and make the questions as straightforward as possible.

Adult participants who become keen on sketching and portraying character could go on to keeping a notebook of observed conversations, physical appearance, and dress. (Those who take notes in cafes or other public places are advised to be as discrete as possible!)
Their Face and Yours

You will need: 🎨 🎨 (some examples of portraits)

What to do:

- Examine a few portraits, and discuss how the artists have represented their subjects in terms of status, wealth, personality, relationships, occupation…
- Discuss how a portrait artist would represent the participants.
- Ask participants to write a portrait of themselves.

  Start by grouping observations into three categories: setting, characteristics and personality. Try to identify 4 of each, at least.

- Reorganise the lists into stanzas of three lines, which link one aspect from each list, for example: “Her massive car and well-groomed hair show her love of fashion and showing off…”

- Try to make the links as close as possible, in the same way that a portrait artist arranges clothing etc. to support a view of the subject’s character and standing.

What Do They See?

You will need: 🎨 🎨 (with a person in it, or an animal!)

What to do:

- Write a description of the room you are in, and its occupants, from the point of view of the character in the artwork.

- Give the participants some structure by asking them to divide their observations into categories: building, furniture, people, activity.

- Where possible, ask them to adopt the voice of the character in their writing, in order to emphasise the defamiliarisation between the world of the artwork and reality.

Exercises given by Kerry Featherstone
Their Face and Yours

This exercise focuses:
on the idea of the self-portrait, but created out of words.
It demands a high degree of self-reflexivity, but can be a very rewarding exercises as it makes participants think about themselves as subjects, rather than selves.

Hints and tips:
This works well if there are a range of portraits to be inspired by.
Give participants the chance to examine several: less confident writers will want to base their work closely on an example that works well for them.

Who?
Most people would find this exercise interesting.
Not for the youngest children, who won’t make the links between appearance and meaning very easily, and will therefore get less enjoyment from playing with the possibilities.

What Do They See?

This exercise focuses:
on an inversion of the usual kind of exercise for which artworks are often used, as this exercise requires the participants to look out from the frame, back at the room.
It encourages participants to see the world through someone else’s eyes, examining the norms of a particular place, culture or time-period.

Hints and tips:
The more bizarre, disjointed and obscure the character/artwork is, the better this works, because the most outrageous things can be said. A picture of a man at a desk won’t provoke a very startling or revealing account of a room full of people sitting at desks.

Who?
Can be used for younger children, if the simpler options are used.
For citizenship students, or students looking at non-British cultures and norms, this can be used to lead into discussion of cultural norms, expressions of identity through clothing, etc.
Monologue

You will need: 🎨 🖼️ (with a person in it)

What to do:

• Choose a portrait. Use this as the basis for a monologue. (The monologue could be spoken by the person depicted, or by a viewer, or by the artist, or any voice that is stimulated for you by the picture.)
• Study the portrait carefully to examine its tones, textures, colours, shapes, contrasts, sense of movement, and so on.
• Use these observations to help you unfold the story told by the monologue. (How do the observations influence the way your character uses language?)
• How much is revealed or hidden by the voice? Do we trust it? Do we better understand the figure in the picture after we have heard the monologue?
• Read out your monologue. What engages you? What surprises you? What was it that sparked your imagination?

Dialogue

You will need: 🎨 , a selection of 🧸

What to do:

• Take two objects that could represent one character each, e.g. a 1920s dress and a 1940s dress.
• These objects need not have such an obvious human character connection (they could be two pebbles) and need not be the same kinds of objects, e.g. a dress and a brick.
• Investigate and draw on the properties of the objects to discover the characters and how they interact.
• Either decide on a situation between the two characters represented by the objects and write the dialogue accordingly ...
  ... or begin writing dialogue and discover the situation as the text develops.

Novel

You will need: 🎨 🧸 (each participant will need a small object, either provided for them or brought in by themselves)

What to do:

• Take your object to a private place.
• Imagine that the object has come into the possession of an imagined character, either found, stolen, inherited, gifted to them, or created by themselves.
• Assume that the object represents some significance to the character that is deeper than the object itself, e.g. a pocket watch could have significance because it belonged to the character’s father.
• Write the last chapter of a novel featuring this character. There’s no need to explain what’s happened beforehand.
• It is possible to also include some monologue and/or dialogue in this ‘final chapter’.

Exercises given by Peter Rumney
These exercises focus:

• on presenting characterisation through a single voice (‘Monologue’).
• on the interaction of characters through dialogue (‘Dialogue’).
• on beginning to think about wider narrative structures, and incorporating characterisation, object details and perhaps also monologue and dialogue (‘Novel’).

Hints and tips:

For the ‘Monologue’ exercise:  
Think about how a particular individual may use language. For example an archaeologist may tend to use longer flowing sentences, whilst a sailor during a storm will use exclamations.

For the ‘Dialogue’ exercise:  
If the objects are, for example, a lady’s fashion item from the 1940s and a clay brick from the 1600s the characters don’t necessarily have to come from these periods. The characters could be contemporary and have nothing to do with fashion or the building trade.

It could be simply that the brick suggests a hard masculine character, perhaps old fashioned in outlook, and the dress represents a sensitive feminine character with a progressive outlook.

For writing the ‘last chapter’ in the ‘Novel’ exercise:  
don’t get trapped into trying to produce a plot-driven resolution, that attempts to ‘tie up the ends’ of the imaginary narrative preceding. Your ending may seem odd and unconventional, but that’s fine!

Who?

For younger children these exercises would need considerable modification, perhaps by focusing on spoken role play rather than writing.

The second and last exercises are best for older children and adults.

All these exercises could also be modified towards history or citizenship (by choosing certain portraits/artworks/photographs) so that they act as source materials or as gateways into discussions within or across different disciplines.
Life’s Paper Trail

You will need: tickets, postcards, invitations etc.

What to do:

• Catalogue the paper trail of a character you have invented, ignoring official documents.

  If participants will find this hard to do independently, you can pre-teach, or generate ideas through discussion.

• List ten pieces of paper (cards and tickets etc.) associated with your character’s life.

  Make a note of what was on each piece of paper. You might also imagine what the piece of paper looked like, and whether the writing was hand-written or typed, mass-produced or unique…

• After each item provide information about when and where it was used, and what difference it made to your character’s life. State if your character kept it, and if so where it was kept or if it was discarded.

“You can find inspiration in almost anything.”

Paul Smith, Fashion Designer

Portraits & Objects

You will need: (a portrait), and a number of

What to do:

• Write a story or poem that combines the portrait and objects.

  For example, a portrait of a sailor could be combined with a broken watch, a glove, a spade and a photo of a woman and child.

• This could simply be a story in which all the items appear, or a more causal narrative, in which one object leads to another somehow.

• A simple version would be that they are all in the same room, owned by an individual. They may be part of a treasure hunt, or clues in a crime investigation.

  For example, consider a portrait of a pelican combined with a silver tea-service, a mobile phone, and a tin of ginger biscuits.

Exercises given by Mark Goodwin and Bead Roberts
These exercises focus:

on using personal objects and/or portraits to generate imagined people. They show how strong characterisation depends on vital detail.

They also encourage participants to make links between characters and objects, and to see what each can reveal about the other.

The exercises are non-specific about whether they produce prose fiction or poetry: the specifics can be decided beforehand, so that all participants are producing something similar, or these exercises can be used to generate materials and ideas that can then be adapted into a particular form.

Hints and tips:

These exercises could be done using actual cards, tickets, invitations, perhaps brought in by the participants or provided on location by a museum or record office. Such archives provide a wealth of inspirational printed ephemera.

The characters generated may be players in a story or perhaps appear in a poem.

If you are using postcards, any written material on the back could also be used to flesh-out a character or a character’s history. You may even discover a ‘found poem’ (see the ‘Found Poem’ exercise in this section).

Who?

Better for older children and adult groups.

Of particular interest to adult groups interested in local history or genealogy (could be part of an organised museum event celebrating local heritage).
Shared Picture Poem

You will need: 📷 📝 (for each member of your group)

What to do:

- This is done with a whole group.
- Each person is responsible for one picture, from which they have to write.

  The kind of writing could be stipulated or left open. For example, some could be instructed to produce physical descriptions whilst others imagine a monologue. The exercise works best when pieces of writing differ in style; you can encourage this by asking some to write in the style of a journalist, whilst others write in the style of a pop song, etc.

- After a period (long or short) of writing, the group comes together and collaborates on a whole poem in which aspects from the different pictures interact (e.g. the people, weather, objects, colours etc.).

  There are several ways of structuring this, for less confident participants: simply contribute alternate lines to the poem; add a stanza each; or organise the final piece by combining lines which have identical or similar images/themes, for example water/sea/rain; flowers/plants/grass.

Plus and Minus Writing

You will need: 📷 📝 or an 🖋

What to do:

- One object or artwork is shared between two people.
- One person writes a positive, upbeat, optimistic response, the other writes a negative, sad, pessimistic version.

  This could take any form: a three line poem or a 1,000 word piece of prose. It’s easier if each one starts with a list of the aspect that they really like or dislike, and then say why.

- For beginners, you can identify a list of vocabulary that will support these descriptions: great, brilliant, beautiful versus rubbish, ugly, pointless.

  Matching the aspects identified with a description from the list will make the exercise very simple, but will still produce the desired contrasts.

Exercises given by John Gallas
These exercises focus:

on different ways of creatively interpreting art and objects. They also make use of collaboration and sharing.

The exercises reveal the diverse ways people can read paintings and objects.

Hints and tips:

Allow plenty of time for collaboration and discussion to evolve.

The ‘Shared Picture Poem’ could be extended beyond pictures and could include other art forms, and other kinds of objects. It’s a great exercise for experimenting with different styles/voices, and can also be used to encourage a new perspective on a well-known object, by insisting on writing in a certain style.

Both exercises are also suitable to try as warm-ups.

Who?

This is more suited to older children and adults, although it is possible to adapt for younger children.

Hershey’s, New York, Kevin Holdaway
Small Detail
You will need: 🎨
What to do:
• Take any small detail from a picture and write about it however you like.
• Read out the writing.
• Discuss why certain details appealed, and why the writer chose to write in the way they did.

Actual Description
You will need: 🎨 or an 🎨
What to do:
• Look at the object or artwork and describe it as precisely as possible without using metaphor or any other poetic or dramatic effects.

The use of simile is allowed. Essentially you are attempting to describe through words in the way a draughts-person would copy.

Look At This
You will need: 🎨
What to do:
• Choose a painting and really look into it. Write notes on the details and content, be as precise and thorough as possible (perhaps in similar way to the exercise above).
• Use the notes as the basis for a short piece of fiction, 1,000 to 1,500 words.
• The only stipulation is that it opens with the lines ‘Come on, have a good look. Look and tell me all about this.’ These lines could also be repeated throughout the story.

Describing a Painting from Memory
You will need: 🎨
What to do:
• Stipulate a certain amount of time in which to observe the painting, this could be as brief as 20 seconds or as long as 5 minutes.
• Move away from the painting or put away the postcards, and then write about the artwork from memory.

Exercises given by John Gallas, Mark Goodwin, Helen Johnson, Deborah Tyler-Bennett
These exercises focus:

on noticing and extracting details from artworks and objects to inform creative writing.

Hints and tips:

Describing from memory and describing from looking directly will produce very different observations, and it is instructive to compare these.

To render vivid ‘real’ details it is best to describe, for example, an actual umbrella in front of you, rather than describing it from memory.

The ‘Look At This’ exercise is particularly effective with landscapes, or interiors, without figures or characters within them. The empty landscape urges us to invent figures and look for evidence of their presence.

Who?

This set of exercises works together well.

They are more suited to older children and adults.
Speaking Object

For this exercise you will need: 📚 📦

What to do:

• Write a page of prose on an object. Write in the third person. If this is a challenge for your participants, then offer a range of subjects that they have to address: physical description, what they think it’s for, whether they like the look of it...

• Answer the following, either as factual (if you know about the object), or make it up.
  - Where did it come from?
  - Who did it belong to?
  - What happened to it before its first owner?
  - What’s happened to it since?
  - Is the owner still a haunting presence?

• Write the piece again as if the object spoke about itself (first person, 'I' narrative). This can be a leap for some participants, so you can offer guidance as in the first step, by identifying aspects about which you would like them to write.

• Compare the two pieces, and see how the tone differs. Which would be best at introducing the object to someone who couldn’t see it? Which is the most interesting to read? Why?

Variations:

List Exercise • Make up a detailed list of the object’s past owners. Include occupations, habits, hobbies, family, background, home and origins. Discuss what led you to these conclusions.

  • Write the object’s physical description using some of the imagined information you’ve written about these past owners. You can consider any bumps and cracks, whether the object is decorative or functional, what it’s made of, where it was made and how....

Baffling Object

• Describe the object in front of you as if you were a journalist or photographer, without saying what it is.

  Your only concern is that someone who is a long way away is able to picture or identify it. Do not use metaphor or analogy. You can use similes. Compare different participants’ responses to the same object: what did they focus on, and how effective are the descriptions?

(For more ‘owner’ and ‘mystery object’ exercises, go to the V&A website. See Section D – Literature Development in the East Midlands.)

Exercises given by Peter Rumney and Deborah Tyler-Bennett
These exercises focus:
on revealing a lot about perspective and point of view.
An ‘I’ narrative can be more intimate than a ‘fly-on-the-wall’ narrative. The reader will believe the narrative in a different way.
The list exercise encourages participants to think about how writers use information, and also about the order in which a story comes to be told.
The ‘Baffling Object’ exercise reveals how tricky it is for a writer to really look very hard at an object and describe its detail.
Participants can be surprised at what they would otherwise not have noticed by adopting this approach.
This exercise demonstrates how an accurate rendering of detail gives writing authority, in the sense that the reader knows that the writer is describing something real that they have actually observed.

Hints and tips:
Depending on the make-up of the group, it may be useful to keep the writing elements of these exercises limited in time to encourage concision, but also to allow the maximum time for discussion.
With these exercises on perspective, a lot of the learning can happen in the comparison between what people wrote, and why they chose to write about certain aspects. This can lead into debate about how ‘objective’ journalism is, or about how people manipulate description depending on their point of view.

Who?
More suited to older children and adults.
The ‘factual’ aspect of these exercises leads to interesting discussion about style, perception and choice of description, but this is better with older groups: these exercises are less fantastical and playful than some of the others, and so will appeal less to younger people.

“It is as though the past is a great ship that has gone ashore, and archivist and writer must gather as much of the rich squandered cargo as they can.”

George Mackay Brown

Viking Merchant Ship, H11.5
Someone Else’s Shoes

You will need: 🌟 🎨 (a pair of shoes or other items of clothing)

(These items could be brought along by the participants, or they may be more exotic and provided by a museum. To explain this exercise we will use the example of a traditional sandal from South-East Asia and a 1950s gold stiletto shoe.)

What to do:

• First imagine the person who might have worn the sandal. Imagine them in detail including:
  - What’s their hair like?
  - What are they wearing?
  - How tall are they?
  - Are they carrying anything?
  - Are they outside or inside?
  - What’s the weather like?
  - What type of surface or ground are they standing on?

• Next imagine the person who might have worn the stiletto.
  - What colour is their hair?
  - What’s their skin like?
  - Are they curvaceous, skinny, middle-aged, or teenage?
  - Are they wearing jewellery?
  - What are they holding?
  - What colours are they wearing?
  - Where are they?
  - What time of day is it?

• Then choose one of your two characters and put them in the other person’s shoes. Write a poem about this experience. Ask:
  - How do they feel - scared, excited, disillusioned?
  - What physical sensations do they experience whilst wearing these shoes?
  - What possibilities have been gained or lost by wearing these shoes?

Exercise given by Katie Daniels
This exercise focuses:

on building characters from the feet up, using physical details.

The third part of the exercise explores the relationship, via sensations, between external qualities and internal emotions.

“Crumpled filing card:
Starched collar worn by lawyer
Thrown down defeated.”

Lee Atkin, Library Assistant

Hints and tips:

This exercise links very well with ‘Faceted Portraits’ in the Short Writing & Discussion Section.

It is effective to focus on what it really feels like to wear an item of clothing; how it makes you stand, sit, or walk. Perhaps encourage participants to think about the last time they tried on a pair of shoes or a coat that was strange to them.

Some items of museum clothing can be tried on (often museums have dressing-up boxes) – dressing up could be part of this exercise.

It is also effective to focus on how certain clothes make us behave. How will we stand wearing a black uniform with shiny silver buttons? How will we stand wearing a ripped and stained corduroy jacket?

Who?

This exercise is for everyone.

If you decide to add dressing up to this exercise you are bound to enthuse young children. Actually, you’re bound to enthuse most adults too!
Paintings as Stanzas

You will need: 🎨, 4 📚

(It is good to have some figures or characters, as well as locations in the artworks. For example a photograph of a hut, and three portraits – which we will use as examples to explain this exercise).

What to do:

• Glean observations and produce writing from the artworks in various ways.
  For example, simply note down details, or list objects in the artworks and tell lies about them, or write monologues, or do an abstract/concrete exercise (see sheet on ‘Telling Lies’ and ‘Abstract/Concrete’ in this section).
  
  The important thing is to first produce lots of material to do with the artworks.

• Choose two opposing emotions, e.g. fear/joy – the poem must start with one of these emotions and then end with the other, but the emotion must not be named. Don’t let participants agonise over this: it’s just a guideline.
  
  - Use the material already gleaned to make up the text of the poem.
    It could provide inspiration however you like — all the material may be used, or hardly any of it may be used directly.

  - Write a poem consisting of five four-line stanzas; lines can be of any length.
    Do not stipulate any rhyme pattern or rhythm.
    Each stanza focuses on an artwork:
    1st stanza focus on the hut
    2nd stanza bring in a character/figure/persona
    3rd bring in another character
    4th bring in yet another
    5th return to the hut

• Give the poem a title.

• After this you could discuss the possibilities of taking away 10 words from the poem, then 20, 30 and so on.
  This final editing game really focuses the writer towards what is redundant in the work and what is vital.

Exercise given by Mark Goodwin
This exercise focuses:

on utilising a series of artworks to inspire and inform emotional progression within a poem.

Producing a poem within the constraints of a given form.

It reveals how a work can be developed from raw material to finished, or nearly finished poem.

Hints and tips:

This is a long exercise, or rather a scheme for a whole workshop - it needs at least three hours. It is probably best to divide it between separate sessions.

The start of the workshop can utilise various exercises to generate raw material to work with. (See the Warm-ups section for examples.)

For further details about final editing games refer to ‘Cut!’ at the end of the Longer Exercises section.

Who?

This exercise, or rather workshop scheme, is best suited to advanced learners and those who have already gained some confidence and experience in writing creatively.

This is much more suited to older children and adults.
Reading the Details

You will need: , or a poem

What to do:

• Give participants some time to look at the artwork, or read the poem. Consider general impressions of mood, theme, subject etc. – only for a few minutes.

• Now give each of you, or pair of participants, a single image or specific detail from the artwork or poem, to consider in isolation from its origin. (Examples of images are: ‘a duck in a puddle’ – this maybe written in a poem, or the duck may appear in the bottom left hand corner of a painting. A detail in this case would be: the sheen on the puddle’s surface.)

• Write down everything you can think of about the detail or image - impressionistic or factual, about a particular material or objects, examples could be: feathers, water, mud, reeds, light, trumpet, braid, barbed-wire. Try to cover as much of a range of things as possible. This will be easier to do with an image (which is comprised of details), whereas finding a range in a specific detail will be tricky; however attempting this a few times will certainly sharpen your powers of observation. (‘Feathers’ are a particular detail, but what colour and texture do they possess?)

• Try to ‘extract’ the image from its context, and reflect on what you personally know/feel about it. (In the poem or artwork the duck in the puddle maybe in a war zone, whereas for you ducks may conjure a particular pleasant childhood memory.)

The writing from this could be in the form of poetry, prose or a list.

• Feed back what was written – pick out bits that other participants find particularly interesting.

• Now go back to the original poem or artwork – consider it as a whole, and discuss it in the light of what you have now collectively discovered about its images and details.

• At the end, ask the participants (and yourself) how you all feel about the process you’ve just been through.

Exercise given by Kerry Featherstone
This exercise focuses:

on seeing how individual details and images contribute to the effect of a poem or artwork, and on making explicit the ways in which we respond to them, often unknowingly, in our responses.

It can also demonstrate how our own personal responses to images can be very different from someone else’s. It shows how the interpretation of a poem or artwork is always bound up with the particular ‘baggage’ or personal associations of the person doing the interpreting.

It can also radically sharpen our powers of observation and association.

Hints and tips:

It is preferable not to pick an abstract poem, but one with physical objects depicted. Poems that work well are ones that mention solid objects – like Brian Patten’s *Dear mum*.

Examples of artworks that would work well for this exercise would be *Boy Trumpeter* by Michael D’Aguilar or *The Whale* by P.J.Crooke. (See also Deborah Tyler-Bennett’s poem about *The Whale* in the Artbox. Artbox is a splendid resource - see Museum Resources Available in the East Midlands section.)

If you’re looking at historical context, this exercise can be used to examine the role of objects and their manufacture, as well as how they impinge on the landscape, or people’s lives. This can be on a simple level (why is the boy trumpeter using a trumpet, not a mobile phone?) or more complex (how might an environmentalist respond to the appearance of the man-made boat in *The Whale*?).

If you’re using reproductions, find something with plenty of detail, and make sure the copy is clear enough for all the detail to be seen.

Focusing on an object could lead to discussions on the role of objects in human life, the importance of different sorts of manufacture and industry, different styles of dress, architecture… In that sense, this exercise could be adapted as a tool for cultural studies discussion.

Who?

This is an advanced task, which requires participants to recognise the difference between an object in an artwork, and a generic version of that object as they know it. As such, it is only suited to the able learner.
### Lies

**You will need:**

- or

**What to do:**

- Make a list of objects, either from a painting or from a collection of objects.

  A single object may provide items for a list, for example a museum display-cabinet will contain: glass, wood, screws, handles, etc.

- Tell lies about the items on the list.

  For example: the screws are silver thoughts, or the glass is a deceitful speech.

- The lies can be used separately to start individual poems, or may be combined into 1 poem.

### Abstract/Concrete

**You will need:**

- or

**What to do:**

- Make a list of 7 objects, from an artwork or collection of objects.

- Make a list of 7 emotions.

- From these 2 lists make pairs of objects and emotions.

- Write a sentence of no more than 10 words, for each pair. The sentence must include the object and the emotion.

  For example, ‘brick’ and ‘love’ could produce the sentence: ‘His love was a brick on her toe.’ or ‘Loving bricks cracked.’

  The lines produced can begin poems or even make up the majority of lines in a poem.

---

Exercises given by Mark Goodwin
These exercises focus:

on presenting an unusual way of approaching metaphor, in ‘Lies’ however it is best if the technical word ‘metaphor’ is not mentioned until the exercise is finished, if mentioned at all!

‘Abstract/Concrete’ can demonstrate how we can make abstract emotions tangible. Difficult concepts such as ‘love’ can reveal part of their meaning if associated with solid objects, as in - ‘Her love was a stone in her shoe’.

Hints and tips:

With the ‘Lies’ try to make it clear that you are after fantastical or bizarre untruths – rather than saying ‘The grass is purple’ say ‘The grass began to bite my toes’. Sometimes the lies will have an obvious metaphorical quality, at other times the lies will seem nonsensical – both can produce good material. ‘The box approached fiery statistics.’

With ‘Abstract/Concrete’ try to stick rigidly to the ten words, however if a particularly good sentence emerges that is eleven or twelve words long then go with it. But don’t forget - in trying to edit the line as tightly as possible new creative possibilities can emerge. Sometimes sentences will not be ‘bizarre’ and will not embed an emotion in an object - they may be straightforward, but these can provide good dramatic or emotive material, e.g. ‘Because he loved her he put her on the ship.’

With both these games it is best if participants don’t think too much and simply write quickly. Some of the sentences will work, and some won’t – this doesn’t matter, writers always produce a certain amount of wasted material.

These exercises work well after the ‘Outpour’ exercise in the Warm-ups section.

Who?

They are best with older children and adults. Both can be good fun with younger children (particularly ‘Lies’) if the focus is speaking rather than writing.
Poetry Engine

You will need: 📝 (A4 paper), 🏢 (two objects e.g. a bird skeleton and a miniature house)

What to do:

- Take the piece of A4 paper, and first fold away the margin (and holes). Then fold the paper in half length-ways. This will give you two thin columns, of an appropriate width, to write in. (Even if your paper has no margins or holes it is best to fold away a standard margin-width.)

- At the top of one column write, for example, the title ‘Bird Skeleton’. Each person then writes about the skeleton down one column.

- At the top of the other column write, for example, the title ‘Mini House’. Each person then writes about the house.

- At this stage it is possible to splice the lines of the two texts together by reading across the columns. You can edit as you will.

Here is an example using the creatures ‘man’ and ‘fish’:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Man</th>
<th>Fish</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>the man was digging,</td>
<td>the fish’s skin sparkled,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>his coat was dark wool</td>
<td>it was radiant as frost</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

the man was digging sparkling fish skin
his coat was dark yet radiant as frost

Exercise given by Mark Goodwin
This exercise focuses:

on juxtaposition, or the bringing together of opposites.

Certain themes can be explored using this method, for example: putting ‘princess’ and ‘witch’ into a poetry engine can produce some profound discoveries about our ideas and stereotypes of beauty and ugliness. ‘Demon’ and ‘angel’ can also produce very interesting results!

Hints and tips:

Any objects will work for this game, e.g. a matchstick and a postcard of The Taj Mahal.

The paper-folding instructions can be tricky to deliver and understand (participants often feel they have stumbled into an Origami class!). It is worth practising a quick delivery routine, otherwise allow enough time to make sure everyone knows how to fold their paper, or provide pre-folded papers à la Blue Peter!

Do stress to participants that they can combine and edit lines however they like, and that they are not looking for chance meanings (although those may and do happen). Lines that have no syntactical sense whatsoever but just sound good are very worthwhile. Also point out that the columns of text can be ‘slid’ up and down alongside each other to give further combinations, and also the positions of the columns can be swapped, e.g. ‘Fish’ then ‘Man’.

The poetry-engine works well as a collaboration. One person could write about Fish, the other about Man, and then together they could work on the splicing. (The ‘Man’ plus ‘Fish’ example given overleaf was a collaboration between Mark Goodwin and Deborah Tyler-Bennett.)

Who?

Anyone who is comfortable with writing. It is possible to modify the poetry-engine for younger children, particularly if focusing on collaboration.
Schoenberg 12 tone poem (using a picture or object)

(This is based on the composer Schoenberg’s 12 tone technique, a method of musical composition.)

You will need: 🎨PIO

What to do:

• Write down 12 words about an object or painting.

  It is advisable that some of the words are little words like ‘and’ or ‘in’. It also helps if there are a few concrete nouns, and some adjectives, rather than abstract nouns like ‘beauty’ or ‘truth’. You can dictate this to any degree you like by identifying parts of speech (a good way of reminding participants what these are) and asking, for example, for 3 nouns, 3 adjectives, 3 conjunctions, and 3 other words of their choice.

• Swap your list of words with the person to your left.

• Produce a poem from the 12 words only.

  Each word can be used more than once, but no extra words may be included.

Exercise given by John Gallas
This exercise:

is a form of sound poetry, and reveals how artworks and objects can be interpreted through verbal musicality and rhythms.

Encourage participants to not be overly concerned with making sense, but rather making sound. This exercise could go well with the ‘Sound Links’ exercise (see Warm-up Exercises section).

The final exercise sometimes produces sentences that make syntactical sense, but more often the effect is predominantly musical.

Hints and tips:

The ‘Poetry-Percussion’ game can also be a good warm-up for this exercise.

Some participants may feel somewhat bamboozled by the lack of referential meaning in what they are being asked to produce – so do stress the sound and musical qualities of this game.

You could perhaps play John Cage’s 4 Minutes and 30 Seconds (of silence!) after the Schoenberg game. See what comes out of framing the silence.

Who?

This would work very well as a part of a cross-curricular collaboration between music and poetry.

Kitchen Sink, Lucy Casson

Kitchh Sink, Lucy Casson
Box of Tricks

You will need: a box and its contents

(A box could be simply a shoebox containing leaves and pine cones etc., or a decorative biscuit tin, or it may be a museum Resource Box with handles and clasps containing a museum object.)

What to do:

- The following are some of the many ways in which to play with boxes.
  - Look into the box
  - What seems familiar?
  - What seems new?
  - What stories do you know?
  - What would you like to know?
  - Choose one thing inside the box and use it as your focus, or your obsession!
  - Use the opening line: ‘In this box I placed …’
  - Who are you?
  - What follows?

Or

- Look into the box and imagine that one of the objects there begins to make a sound, or even that one of the objects speaks to you.
- What happens next?
- Is it a lone sound/voice? Or is it joined by others?
- What do you do about it?

Exercises given by Mark Goodwin and Deborah Tyler-Bennett
This exercise focuses:

on secrets, on things hidden and then perhaps revealed.

Boxes make us think and feel about the idea of inside versus outside, and this can be extended to include our internal human feelings versus our external perceptions.

Hints and tips:

Some objects are taken for granted, as they are so much a part of human life. Boxes, tins and containers seem at first to be mundane, but their simplicity and what they stand for can be extremely evocative.

Boxes can be extended to include: drawers, wardrobes and cupboards, and even corners, or even rooms or entire buildings. All of these are very powerful poetic stimuli for writing creatively.

Boxes are worth taking time over. Explore slowly, don’t miss the outside by rushing to open the box. Some boxes may have hidden aspects or details that will be missed without enough time. This whole slow discovery process can be written about. For example, after a group has played with a box they could then do an ‘outpour’ exercise (see for example the ‘Outpour’ exercise in the Warm-ups section).

Who?

Boxes are for everyone: children and adults alike are intrigued by boxes.

A box workshop can be as brief as an hour, but it is best if it is much more extended. Box exploration combined with various writing games can easily engage most groups for a whole day!

Boxes of various kinds with writing about them, in them or on them or by them, can produce wonderful displays. (See Section B – Being Creative with Creative Writing.)
Cut!

You will need: some creative work written by the participants

What to do (not necessarily in this order):

• Re-read the writing – preferably out loud. (If the group are confident enough, ask them to read a piece that is not their own.)

• Ask each participant to make note of what is absolutely essential to their piece. A simple way of discovering the essential is to ask – ‘If you could keep just one phrase, what would it be?’ And then ask – ‘If you could keep another phrase, what would it be?’

• Try removing all the small words (it, on, has, like, and). Try removing ‘the’ throughout the writing.

  Or try removing any five words, then ten, then fifteen and so on, noticing and discussing the effects as the number of lost words increases. Sometimes this process can produce amusing results. (This little game can be done on its own as an introduction to editing.)

• Try removing adjectives.

• Try changing the tense.

• Try turning a piece of prose into a poem by playing with line-endings.

• Try to summarise a poem or fiction into 50 words. Look at what is lost in terms of language and mood.

• Reintroduce words and phrases onto these bare bones – either the ones that have been chopped out, or new ones that spring to mind.

  With each introduction, ask whether the addition is an improvement or not.

• Read the complete end product again, preferably out loud; discuss the changes and how they have improved the piece.

  The writing that emerges should be tighter and stronger. Often less is more.

Exercise given by Kerry Featherstone and Mark Goodwin
This exercise is designed:

to offer the chance for participants to edit their own work, or to reconsider its form. It can be done immediately after writing, but is probably best planned as a session a few days after the writing has taken place.

The exercise can lead to discussion of how to edit, and why, and how difficult it might be, or how creative it might be.

Editing games can strengthen pieces of writing by making writers and readers see them afresh, and spot the non-essential words or phrases.

Hints and Tips:

The pieces of writing that can emerge from editing games can be radically different, obscure and short – this is no bad thing, in most cases!

Hearing criticism can be difficult for any writer, particularly if the piece has emotional significance. Hearing someone else read the piece can be useful for getting some distance from it.

Discussing the emotional challenge of criticism will help. The fact that trying to give well intentioned criticism can be just as ‘scary’ as receiving it is often overlooked.

Editing is not often considered to be a creative part of creative writing, however editing can lead a writer in surprising directions, and can be most satisfying, and even fun! Discussing this can help lead new writers away from feeling the ‘difficulty’ often associated with editing.

Always stress that any criticism should be given, and also received, as a sincere concern to improve a piece of work and help its author to grow.

Who?

This is for participants who have already done some writing, and are ready to hear comments on how their writing may be improved.

This probably implies older children and adults, but is more a case of confidence and group dynamic than a specific age-group or educational context.

This is always best done with groups that know each other reasonably well. The trick is to engender an atmosphere of trust.
Practising reading out and performing can be great fun and very rewarding if shared within a group.

Encouraging participants to have a go at reading and offering constructive critical feedback on each other’s performance can be a very quick way of improving out-loud reading skills.

The poet Seamus Heaney maintains that in a poem every word counts. By practising reading out and performing, by ‘feeling’ every spoken word in the mouth we become more attuned to the vitality of individual words in poems or even prose.

This attention to the detail of sound and the sense of words will also enhance the ability to write creatively.

A lot of people can feel nervous about reading aloud. Even the most confident of readers can sometimes forget the basic ‘rules’ of performance. Here are some basic tips that you or your learners may find useful.

Some tips on reading out:

- Don’t cover your face with the paper or book you are reading from.
- It is good to stand up, to allow easier breathing.
- Try to speak to be heard – slowly, clearly, and loud enough.
- Feel each word in your mouth, enjoy saying the sounds.
- Pause for commas, full-stops, line endings, stanza or paragraph breaks.
- Slow it down! After reading a title, pause. At the end of a piece, pause before moving on to the next (count to 5 silently in your head). Slow it down!
- Try changing tone of voice to emphasise different emotional parts of the poem or story.
- It is very useful to read through a piece, before reading it out loud, to identify where you will pause or change voice tone. This is particularly important for prose pieces.
- Beware of reading very long pieces of prose, or even poetry. One voice monopolising a performance or workshop can spoil the pace.
- Reading work out loud whilst on your own can give you a chance to listen to your own voice in a clearer way than when you are surrounded by others. Practising at home can be very instructive.
As indicated in Section A - Creative Wordplay, the workshops which are at the heart of Words & Things are designed to support and enhance creative writing, but they can also be used in other ways.

For example…

All workshops which focus on objects or artworks also have the potential for:

**Sensory exploration**

– we have 5 senses, often under-used. Objects and artworks can be used to explore:

**The sensory deprivation of disability or imprisonment.**

You can discuss how loss of any of the senses affects our impression of the world: of strangers, of places, sounds, etc. Learners could write a poem in which one colour is absent (for example, consider all the phrases that include the word ‘green’: how would we replace it, if we had no sense of green?), and then develop the exercise by writing a description of an object with no visual details, adjectives or facts.

**The evocative memories through smell.**

Two descriptions of the same place; one written using only smell, the other using all the senses except smell, will bring this aspect into relief. It could be interesting to discuss the different effects of the pieces, and how they bring the place to mind.

**Communicating without some of the 5 senses.**

Ask yourself if you’ve ever tried to have a conversation without speaking, and whilst wearing a blindfold (best for people who are not complete strangers!). Each person writes down what they were trying to say, and what they thought the other person said.

Alternatively, think of describing something visual without using any visual vocabulary, or describing a piece of music without any reference to sound. Ask simple questions: What does the internet taste of? What’s the sound of a watercolour? What colour would a jazz solo be?

**The challenges and opportunities of running workshops for learners who are sight - or hearing - impaired.**

These learners will often respond in different ways, and focus their descriptive work on different aspects of a solid object. A poetry engine exercise combining two of these approaches can be very powerful and effective.

(See also Additional Support for Learners in this section and Using Museum and Artworks in Multi-sensory Ways in Section B).


These are questions which can structure discussions, research and observations in history, science and technology, sociology, politics, art and design, geography, economics, amongst other curriculum areas.

**Cultural comparisons**

Many classes and groups involve students from different countries or faiths.
Artworks and objects can be the focus of discussions about custom, practice, tradition, taste, values and expectations. An object can be used to encourage students to write down what different kinds of ‘value’ it has: historical, sentimental, fiscal, religious, cultural, utilitarian. Discussion of a range of objects, will broaden the debate.

Objects can also help with empathy exercises, looking at someone from another culture, or from another time period, or simply someone of a different age or occupation. The important thing here is for the learners to be aware of what is shaping their responses. In creative writing terms, outcomes might be a dialogue, or two-part description, in which two different voices discuss the ‘value’ of the same object, without ever naming it.

**Concept analysis and debating**

Framing/structuring debates about making and crafting work, and about assessing what has been created i.e. about aesthetics, and beauty, and the judgements and standards which underpin these concepts. As far as aesthetics are concerned, the paragraph above also holds true. We tend to value art and craftwork by preconceived factors: what are these? How important are they? Elements of our preconceptions can be revealed if we ask ourselves to consider a made object either in terms of senses other than the visual, or along other lines: materials and size; usefulness; figurative accuracy…..

**The history of science and technology**

This can be explored through objects and artworks. Learners can be asked to note the primary materials used for either tools, decorative objects, clothing, or modes of entertainment in objects from different time-periods. What do these materials imply about the society from which they came: its values, expectations and technologies? Do they imply anything about the intelligence, status or habits of the people who might have owned them? What was the relationship between the makers of the objects and the owners? Would that relationship be the same today?

**Developing language and expression**

*(first languages, or new/second languages)*

The simplest object or artwork can be a stimulus for developing ideas and language. A familiar or unfamiliar object might provoke awareness of gaps in vocabulary, or provide a hook upon which to hang learning of a particular area of vocabulary. This might relate to lifestyle comparisons, technology or professional fields, as well as personal habits. Artwork, craftwork and music can be the spur to learning new ways of expressing preference, taste, identity and similarities.

**Creative writing isn’t the exclusive preserve of poets, novelists, dramatists, journalists and English teachers. Themed creative writing workshops can also be used in other curriculum areas, such as:**

- History
- Citizenship
- Media studies (where exercises can be modified to explore different registers and styles of language)
- Skills for Life
- Group work (when the process is at least as important as the ‘product’ or curriculum outcome)
- Issue-based work (again, when the process is integral to the exploration of the subject, and the object or artwork is a vehicle for addressing difficult concepts)
Many of the exercises given in this section can be used across the curriculum and in different contexts.

For example, further ideas for the ‘Labels’ exercise (see Exercises for Short Writing in this section), which focuses on objects could include...

- This activity could imaginatively touch other disciplines such as anthropology, science, or art. It could also be used as a way of exploring how different disciplines use and describe information (e.g. history, art, drama, technical writing). Again, this can focus on one object, and involve writing in different modes: formal, interpretive, descriptive, personal, imaginative. For more advanced learners, this can be developed into a discussion on truth and perspective: given the list of approaches outlined above, which is ‘true’ and which is ‘false’?

- As a warm-up some labels could be pre-prepared and mixed up, forming the basis of an ice-breaking treasure hunt which could help learners to get used to a building, or to a set of objects or places.

- There could also be pre-prepared ‘occupational labels’ for learners to wear so that they can assume a character, discipline, approach or identity before writing/discovering/improvising. These could be swapped, and differences could be explored.

- Making labels could be a fun way of writing in different registers – exploring the purposes and effects of different content and styles.

- Alternatively, imagine your living room was going to be curated for an exhibition about life in the 21st Century. What would you select, and how would you label it?

Further ideas for the ‘Portrait Piece’ exercise (see Longer Exercises in this section), which focuses on artworks could include:

- Particular portraits could be chosen for their relevance to a discipline or period in history.

- Portraits can be used to build characters and scenes in drama workshops. These can be portraits of characters from the same time period, or disparate characters used for improvisation exercises looking at how different characters interact.

- Portraits can be used to stimulate more focused discussions and observations across almost all curriculum areas, e.g. history, art history, citizenship, spirituality, art and design. Writing might focus on a piece in the voice of the artist, explaining what they were trying to say about their subject. Insist that the artist makes explicit reference to the artwork, linking appearance and effect. Ask other students to discuss how convincing the writing, and the voices, are.

- Portraits could be used for issue-based and gender-based work. How do artists from different periods represent women, children, non-white characters, working-class characters? In response to a painting featuring several figures, ask students to write in the voice of one of the figures, explaining how they feel about being painted, who they are, where they come from, and what their role is in relation to the other figures.

- Another interesting question is to ask which of the figures being portrayed will see the finished work, and in what context. Ask participants to write a description of the scene, either in the first or third person, giving the response of a subject to their first sight of their own portrait. What does this response say about the relationship between painter and subject, or subject and art generally?
Education establishments have a statutory duty to provide a learner with the kind of reasonable support which is necessary for them to learn – creative writing sessions are not exceptions to this.

‘Additional’ or ‘learning’ support for learners can involve a range of things including:

• physical aids and adaptations (e.g. hearing loops, large print, coloured paper, voice, activated software, note-taking or translation).

• 1-to-1 practical support (which may aid physical access, comprehension and communication).

• emotional support (which may help learning to take place more effectively).

• access to quiet areas or ‘time out’.

• being in much smaller groups.

Learners who need additional support in the context of a creative writing workshop, may include people who have physical and sensory impairment, learning disabilities, mental health difficulties, as well as people who are in vulnerable situations (e.g. homelessness, domestic violence), people with very low self confidence (e.g. carers or long-term unemployed) and people who may have fled from violence or conflict.

The approach and the workshops described in Words & Things can offer really effective opportunities to engage with learners who find traditional approaches stressful or ineffective. There are various reasons for this:

• The workshops lend themselves to different (and blended) learning styles.

• Some learners need a more tactile approach (literally ‘hands on’) and other object-focused projects have found this to be particularly effective with boys, and with people who have learning difficulties.

• Activities which focus on objects or artworks rather than on direct contributions from participants can seem less threatening, and can encourage more involvement.

• The workshop approach to participants’ contributions is strengths-based, i.e. everyone’s contribution is valued and acknowledged: this is a strong contrast to assessments and grades.

• The work produced can be displayed and/or published, and this can be a great boost to creativity and self esteem.

• Using the imagination is an outlet which can be buried through disability, oppression and illness, so activities which can encourage playfulness and self expression are really valuable.

Most of the workshop activities in Words & Things can be adapted for most participants; it isn’t necessary for all participants to speak, hear, read or write perfect English, and this shouldn’t be assumed to be a prerequisite for involvement or creativity.

Learners, for example, don’t need to write to practice literacy skills or engage in creative word-play. Confidence with words can be built by playing with speech (and any concrete record of that work can be provided by recording the spoken word or by getting another person to scribe for them). Once learners’ confidence with words has been encouraged in this way, they are then more likely to be ready to move on to the written word.

**Scribing:** Process of writing down for others who do not wish to or cannot write for themselves, often employed by teachers or workshop facilitators. Scribing can also be useful when pairing a visually impaired participant with a sighted partner.